

Calm Eye of the Storm: Dreamy Days in Vilnius

Lithuanians Seem Fatalistic, Untroubled

By Michael Dobbs
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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R., April 26—The phone was busy all day at the headquarters of the Lithuanian independence movement Sajudis with patriotic suggestions for beating the Kremlin's economic embargo. The ideas ranged from the sensible to the bizarre.

"Keep your tea in a thermos," advised an old lady who survived both Nazi and Soviet occupation in World War II. "Then you won't have to keep boiling water." "Ride a bicycle to work," proposed a Vilnius office worker. "Issue identity cards to prevent Soviet soldiers from buying anything in our shops," suggested a farmer. "Add tree resin to your gasoline, and your car will travel much farther," said a pensioner.

There is a dreamy sense of unreality about life in Lithuania 6½ weeks after it defied the Kremlin by unilaterally declaring its independence. The war of nerves between Vilnius and Moscow has made front-page headlines around the world. But here at the center of the battle, all is outwardly calm. People seem curiously detached, almost fatalistic, as if the struggle for Lithuanian independence is being fought way above their heads.

A stroll down Gediminas Street in Vilnius, from Sajudis headquarters to the parliament building, suggests that there is still overwhelming support for

the idea of Lithuanian independence. The popular mood is caught by the sign outside the gleaming glass-and-concrete Communist Party headquarters halfway down the avenue: "A Lithuania Without Sovereignty is a Lithuania Without a Future."

At the same time, however, some people expressed reservations about the wisdom of tweaking the bear's nose so vigorously when Lithuania is almost entirely dependent on the Soviet Union for supplies of energy and raw materials. The economic sanctions imposed by Moscow have not made life unbearable for Lithuanians, who still enjoy a higher standard of living than most Russians, but they have caused considerable inconvenience.

"Practically all Lithuanians want independence. There's no doubt about that," said Gediminas Stakavicius, a Vilnius office worker who had just spent four hours standing in line for gasoline for his car. "But we're realizing that it's difficult to achieve independence overnight. Perhaps we should have been a little more diplomatic about the way we went about it."

Traffic along Gediminas Street—formerly Lenin Avenue, now renamed in honor of a Lithuanian national hero—has dwindled sharply since the start of the embargo. Residents say the once-polluted air is again breathable. Motorists are rationed to about eight gallons of gasoline a

See LITHUANIA, A36, Col. 5

Lithuanians Calmly Await Crisis Outcome

LITHUANIA, From A1

month—and even that is hard to obtain. Buses and trolleys are packed.

Vilnius radio announced today that rationing of some food items will begin on Tuesday. Sugar and detergent will be rationed, but no other details were given.

The difficulties of everyday life have caused some Vilnius residents to draw unfavorable comparisons between Lithuania's new president, Vytautas Landsbergis, and his predecessor, Algirdas Brazauskas, the head of Lithuania's breakaway Communist Party. A frequently heard remark is that Landsbergis, a professional musicologist, lacks the political skills that Brazauskas developed as he fought his way up the Communist Party hierarchy.

"If the parliament had kept Brazauskas as president, we would have got independence within five years—without all the trouble we are going through now. I am for independence, but it shouldn't be at the expense of ordinary workers," said a Vilnius taxi driver.

Opinion polls showed that Brazauskas, who is serving in the new Sajudis-dominated government as deputy prime minister, remains the most popular politician in Lithuania, with an approval rating of more than 90 percent. Landsbergis ranks behind Brazauskas and Pope John Paul II, with an approval rating in the mid-70s.

In an interview in his office this evening, Landsbergis brushed aside suggestions that he lacks the art of political compromise. "There are some compromises that are possible and others that are impossible. I

would like to find a way of being flexible without being hypocritical," he said.

Asked what kind of compromises with the Kremlin were possible, Landsbergis suggested that young Lithuanians might continue to serve in the Soviet army on condition that they perform their military service on the republic's territory. This would mark a significant concession by the Lithuanian president, who had earlier gone on record opposing military service by Lithuanians in "a foreign army."

Kremlin officials have called on the Lithuanian parliament to freeze the March 11 declaration of independence and to suspend legislation that contravenes the Soviet constitution. But Landsbergis insisted that "you can't simply put a declaration of independence into a refrigerator."

The Soviets "seem to think that these documents are just pieces of paper on which are written mere words. For us, these documents are a lot more than that. They can't just be rewritten," he said.